

## **TRUST ME I'M AN ADVERT! HOW TO CREATE A TRUSTING BRAND IDENTITY THROUGH ADVERTISING**

Dr. Kathleen Mortimer, University of Northampton, UK  
Dr. Annie Danbury, University of Bedfordshire, UK

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Corresponding author:

Dr. Kathleen Mortimer  
Senior Lecturer  
Northampton Business School  
Park Campus  
Boughton Green Road  
Northampton NN2 7AL

Email: [Kathleen.mortimer@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:Kathleen.mortimer@northampton.ac.uk)  
Telephone: +44 (0) 1604 892148

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the importance of Relationship Marketing has been recognised, there has been considerable discussion in the Marketing literature on Trust generally. However, the creation of a trusting brand identity through advertising has received little attention. This paper is our first step towards examining this relationship. Focus group research was undertaken to identify the characteristics of print advertisements perceived as portraying a trusting image. Reasons for trusting a brand were also explored. The results show that advertisements that are simple, straightforward and clear are perceived as being more trusting. Consumers are also quite critical of current advertising efforts in building a trusting brand image.

### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The recognition of the importance of trust in Marketing was a result of the fundamental shift that took place in the early 1990's from a transactional Marketing approach to Relationship Marketing. A seminal paper by Morgan and Hunt (1994) demonstrated the importance of commitment and trust in building a relationship with customers. They define trust as "when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity". This definition is based on trusting either a person or an organisation and incorporates the idea that trust is not only linked to consistency (i.e. reliability) but also that there is a belief that the person or organisation would act in the appropriate way, i.e. in the other parties interest, if necessary. The reliance element could be considered a rational element of the construct while the integrity is more affective (Blois, 1999).

Since the Morgan and Hunt (1994) paper, the topic of trust has been explored in some depth, with 35 papers being written on the subject in 2006 alone (Kenning, 2007). The discussion of trust has evolved from the business to business literature to more general marketing journals with the slow recognition that trust is also important in the business to consumer markets. This is obviously rather different as the trust is now being linked to an inanimate object. However it is recognised that customers can perceive brands as having personalities (Aaker, 1996) and can feel some loyalty towards them. As a result, brands are being personified and therefore it is possible to trust them. Indeed, these constructs may be linked. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) examined 107 brands and found that brand trust had a strong impact on brand loyalty in both its forms i.e. attitudinal loyalty and purchase loyalty which then led to increases in market share and premium pricing. Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2004, 2005) also found a positive relationship between brand trust, brand loyalty and brand equity.

So it is clear that brand trust leads to many positive outcomes for the brand owner. It is therefore important to establish how it can be created. Particularly as there is evidence to suggest that customers are being increasingly cynical and levels of brand trust are decreasing (Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009). There is surprisingly very little work in this area. A study by Xingyuan, Li and Wei (2010) examined the impact of three sources of information on brand trust; user experience, word of mouth (WOM) and advertising. They proposed a strong relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust and thereby examined how these different sources of information contributed to brand knowledge. Perhaps, unsurprisingly,

they found that user experience had the strongest influence. Advertising was good at increasing brand awareness, product knowledge and company knowledge but less effective at influencing perceived value. The important influence of consumption experience was also supported by Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2005).

Research on the link between advertising and trust specifically consists of two main threads. One line of research is people's perceptions of advertising generally and how trustworthy they perceive it to be. This is important because if people don't trust advertising then they may be less influenced by individual brand attempts to build trust through that marketing communications tool. Indeed this negative perception of all advertising was identified by Li and Miniard (2006) as a challenge. In 2009 Soh, Reid and King developed the ADTRUST scale, the first scale to measure Trust in Advertising so that this area could be explored further. The scale identifies four main factors, reliability, usefulness, affect and willingness to rely on. It has not yet been adopted in other studies but may be a useful tool in future research.

The other line of research examines how advertisements can be designed to create a trusting image for the brand. [One well-researched tool employed to create this trusting image is the use of endorsers. It has been stated that 25% of all advertisements in the UK and USA use celebrity endorsers and this increases to 75% in Japan. Studies show that the credibility of an endorser, which should contain the three dimensions of expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness, can have a direct impact on attitude to the advertisement and the perceived credibility of the brand through association \(Lafferty et al 2002; Spry et al 2011\). However a study that compared corporate credibility and endorser credibility found that endorser credibility has a stronger impact on attitude to the advertisement whereas corporate credibility had more impact on brand attitude \(Goldsmith et al, 2000\). The importance of the company image as well as the brand image is important to highlight here, particularly when looking at services where the corporate brand and product brand can be the same.](#) Garretson and Niedrich (2004) specifically examined the role of [fictitious](#) spokes-characters in advertising, such as Michelin Man, and how they are perceived by consumers as trusting. Their results show that trust is linked to the perceived expertise of the character and the level of nostalgia that it brings and this has a positive effect on brand attitude.

Li and Miniard (2006) examined how to create a trustworthy image of a brand through advertising by undertaking two advertising experiments using a fictitious car repair company, [without the use of celebrity endorsers](#). It was found that the inclusion of the words "*You can trust us to do the job for you*" had an impact on the number of positive thoughts about the advertisement and the brand. The brand was perceived to be more trustworthy compared to the advertisement without those words and consequently purchase intention increased. Li and Miniard (2006:111) acknowledge that their study "only scratched the surface" and [that](#) much more work needed to be done in this area. Their findings were based on an experiment using a fictitious car repair company which is a high involvement service and consequently a high level of information processing would normally result due to high risk factors. Interestingly, a current radio advertisement for Country Vehicles, a car repair company in the UK, also adopts a similar slogan: "A service you can trust".

Our exploratory study follows on from the work of Li and Miniard (2006) by examining high involvement services further and is designed to answer the following research questions:

- What ingredients do advertisements portraying a trusting brand image have that others don't?

- What makes people trust specific brands?

At a more macro level, all these studies on advertising and trust have been undertaken in the USA, with the exception of the work of Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman. It is therefore worthwhile to undertake research in Europe that reflects more closely our practitioners' efforts due to differences in the advertising industry.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the subject further, three focus groups were conducted with Marketing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate students, containing a total of 38 student perceptions. They were shown nine advertisements which appeared in the Metro free London newspaper on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2012. It was possible to group these advertisements into three relevant product categories; mobile telephone providers, financial services and holidays. It was not felt necessary for the participants to be familiar with all the brands as it was their response to the advertisements which was initially of interest to us.

Each advertisement was presented to them on slides and they were given one minute to write down whether they trusted the advertisements and why or why not. They were then shown the three advertisements together and asked to compare them in terms of portraying a trusting image. Lastly they were required to step back and describe the brands they trusted within that category more generally. This process was repeated for all three product categories. When all advertisements had been examined the participants were asked to indicate a brand that they trusted the most and why. Finally, participants were asked how they felt about advertisements generally in terms of trust. Once the form had been completed there was a general discussion with the group about brand trust to pick up any issues that the form may not have captured.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first three tables (see below) present the responses that were received from asking the question: "Do you trust this ad: why/why not?" Selections of both positive and negative comments have been included for each advertisement to represent the main issues that were raised. The highlighted brand in each table indicates the advertisement that was perceived to be most trustworthy out of the three. This decision was unanimous across all three focus groups.

### Tables 1, 2, 3 here

The examination of comments in the three categories revealed some interesting findings. Firstly, it would seem that an advertisement needs to be very simple and straightforward in its communications in order to be perceived as honest and trusting. When advertisements suggest that something is *free* or a *good deal* people become suspicious and are looking for the *catch*. All information needs to be presented clearly and be *straight to the point*. The amount of information that the advertisement should contain is difficult to define as advertisements were criticised for having too little as well as too much information. Certainly a large amount of *small print* is perceived negatively and needs to be handled with care. It is good to include prices, but they need to be precise and understandable. To present prices *from* is perceived as rather misleading. Visuals are generally regarded as helpful in creating a more trusting image. Seeing *happy customers* helps to communicate some of the main points and adds a more

emotive message to accompany the facts and figures. Evidence of awards also has a positive impact as well as links to social media sites. However some advertisements were perceived as looking *cheap* which then influenced the participants' perception of the brand. [The tangibilisation of services through providing information in advertising is discussed in the services advertising literature but there seems a lack of evidence of it being adopted by practitioners \(Mortimer, 2000\).](#)

~~One finding that became clear during the focus groups was the strong link between previous brand knowledge and perception of the advertisements. of the challenges of obtaining the primary data was encouraging the participants to perceive the advertisements without the influence of previous brand knowledge.~~ As illustrated in the work of Xingyuan, Li and Wei (2010), user experience has a significant impact on how the brand is perceived. Our study shows that it also has a strong impact on perceptions of brand communications, even if the brand in question is being promoted in a product category where personal experience has not taken place e.g. Tesco and Virgin. Such brand trust is obviously invaluable and contributes greatly to brand equity. It is why brands like Tesco and Virgin can successfully extend their portfolio into new product categories such as financial services.

It is interesting to note the long list of "trusted brands" that were provided by the participants for each product category investigated. Again, the main reason given for each choice was user experience. This came through particularly strongly with financial services where a number of people talked about the brand being used by the family and the reference to "my bank". [This would suggest that it takes time to build a trustworthy identity. Lopamudra and Subhadip \(2011\) suggests that perceived credibility is a result of the company being perceived as consistently competent and honest.](#) The length of the lists would suggest that the positioning of "trust" does not seem to be occupied by any particular brand in these product categories at the present time [which may indicate an opportunity.](#)

#### Table 4 here

Table 4 provides a list of the most trusted brands from our study. It is worth noting that they cover a wide range of different products and services as well as examples of high and low involvement purchases. This is despite evidence to suggest that trust is more important for high involvement product categories (Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009). However, the reasons provided for trusting a brand were less varied. Consistent quality came through very strongly, based on reputation and personal experience. The size of the company, how long they have been established and their level of customer service were also highlighted. These are obviously all characteristics that can be communicated through advertising and will be explored in further research.

Lastly the participants were asked whether they trusted advertising. Their perception of advertising was influenced by the type of product being advertised and the advertisement itself. As one participant put it "*I only trust ads for trustworthy brands*". If a customer has a positive opinion of a brand then that influences their perception of that brand's advertising. A number of participants used make-up and financial services as examples of products whose advertisements would be the least trustworthy. The fact that models were retouched and false eyelashes were used to promote mascara was cited as examples of how advertising tries to fool people. Indeed, an undercurrent prevailed in the responses which suggested a lack of trust and a feeling of being fooled e.g. "*they rarely tell you the entire truth*" and "*don't trust most*

*of them – strings attached*". These findings support other evidence indicating that trust in brands is decreasing at a macro level (Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009). Customers are becoming more cynical about brands and their claims of being the best. They see that the emphasis on short term goals within organisations has led to quality inconsistencies, product recalls, and poor service encounters resulting in not wishing to have a "*relationship*" with all the brands that they buy.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine advertisements for high involvement services and identify the ingredients needed to portray a trusting brand image. A more general objective was to explore why people trust certain brands. The impact of user experience on brand trust comes through very strongly and brand owners need to ensure that their brands are consistently meeting consumers' expectations to encourage loyalty and positive WOM. However, the results from this initial research do indicate that advertising can assist in creating and maintaining a trusting image. It would seem that consumers value advertising that is clear, simple and straightforward. They are generally wary of being tricked in some way and cynical when it comes to deals, offers and small print. Tools that advertising practitioners can utilise to address this seems to be more emotive messages, possibly through visuals, evidence of awards, links to social media sites and indications of the size of organisation and how long they have been in operation. More research is obviously necessary to explore these findings further as they are based on high involvement services and on a specific group of people, both limitations preventing generalisations to be made. Meanwhile perhaps advertisers should be more critical of their own efforts in attempting to build relationships with consumers based on some of the poor practices that have been identified in this study. It is a sobering thought that young people are so critical of the advertising they are exposed to even for brands that they buy.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1: Advertisements for Mobile Telephone Service Providers

Mobile Tel.	YES	NO
Tesco	Clear facts and figures including price.	I don't associate Tesco with mobiles
	Award, simple design, realistic	There is always a catch!
Virgin	Clear terms and conditions	Lots of small print
	Break down of service features	Nothing is free!
3	Nicely laid out	Downloads hard to measure
	Simple	Not much information
Trusted brands in this category	Orange, O2, Tesco, T-Mobile, Virgin, Vodaphone	

Table 2: Advertisements for Financial Service Providers

Financial services	YES	NO
Halifax	Happy customers	Looks cheesy
	Clear statements and offers	Small print – hidden costs
HSBC	They look serious about money	Don't like the word "free"
	Look professional	No images, too many words
Lloyds	Straight to the point	Juvenile
	Simple and fresh	Don't trust banks
Trusted brands in this category	Santander, Natwest, Lloyds, HSBC, Nationwide, Barclays, Halifax, Nationwide;	

Table 3: Advertisements for Travel Service Providers

Holidays	YES	NO
Globalenduro	People having fun	Not enough information
	Contact details and links to social networks	No reference to price
Virgin	Simple and clear	Prices "from" suggests extra costs
	Good to have prices	"sale ends tonight!" cheapens the brand
Kesari	Straightforward pricing	Advert looks cheap
	More specific details	Too much text and stuff going on.
Trusted brands in this category	Virgin, BA, Thomas Cook, First Choice, Last.minute.com, Thomson, expedia	



Table 4: List of most trusted brands

Phase Eight	Chanel	Apple
Nivea	Papermate	M & S
John Lewis	VW	Virgin
Selfridges	Adidas	Holland and Barrett
Nike	Heinz	Barbour
T-Mobile	McDonald's	Co-op
Tesco	ASOS	Amazon
	HSBC	